



AUDIO FAQ

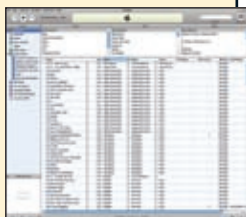
Q I want to buy music online. Does it matter which MP3 player I choose?

A Digital music is sold online in various formats and few MP3 players support them all. Most online stores sell protected files that cannot be copied freely. You must do a bit of research before you buy, or you could end up with limited options.

Microsoft's Windows Media Audio (WMA) format is used by the largest number of stores, including Napster (www.napster.co.uk) and MSN Music (<http://music.msn.co.uk>). A huge range of players support WMA, but not all will play protected files. Check the technical specifications of a player or visit www.playsforsure.com for details.

MP3 players made by Sony and Apple don't support WMA files. The software that comes with them can convert unprotected tracks to a supported format, but you won't be able to import music bought from stores such as Napster. Instead, you must buy music from the manufacturer's own store. If you have an iPod you must go to www.itunes.co.uk. SonyConnect might be more limiting. For more information, see 'Online Music Stores', *Shopper* January 2006.

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REVIEW MP3 PLAYER

APPLE iPod 60GB

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £294 inc VAT

SUPPLIER <http://uk.insight.com>

DETAILS www.apple.com

iPod MP3 players dominate the market, but you can hardly accuse Apple of resting on its laurels. Just five months ago, the full-size iPod was updated to include photo-display features. Shortly afterwards, the iPod nano usurped a still-youthful iPod mini and the iTunes phone finally appeared. Just in time for Christmas, the full-sized iPod has been updated again.

The most obvious change to this fifth-generation model is a larger screen and the introduction of video playback. The iTunes store has a selection of music videos and animated Pixar shorts, but the British range is smaller than the USA's and each download is more expensive. You can import your own videos to the supplied iTunes 6 software, but you'll be able to transfer them to the iPod only if they've been authored or converted by QuickTime Pro 7, which costs £20 including VAT. It seems odd that iTunes can manage the conversion of WMA files to Apple's AAC format, yet not perform the video equivalent.

The new iPod comes with a simple slip case, which should help prevent scratches. Apple no longer supplies an AC charger, though, and Mac owners will be disappointed that FireWire support has been dropped. This iPod is thinner than the outgoing model; the 30GB player is just 11mm deep. The 60GB iPod is 3mm deeper, but Apple says its battery will last for 20 hours of music playback rather than 14. It played our mixture of MP3 and AAC files continuously for just over 19 hours, which is excellent.



Battery life is much shorter during video playback. A single charge treated us to 17 showings of Michael Jackson's *Thriller* video, which took just under four grisly hours. The 320x240 pixel resolution of the iPod's display helps videos and photos look impressive. Watching a film on the 64mm screen would soon prove tiring, though, particularly if it were subtitled.

Apple's bud earphones sound weak with flat EQ settings, and we noticed distorted bass when using many of the presets. This was most noticeable on dance and hip-hop tracks with a prominent drumbeat and happened irrespective of listening volume. High-quality headphones produced better sound, but didn't solve the problem.

The new iPod has a fantastic design, and its announcement has doubtless caused a flurry of rewritten Christmas lists. However, we expect exceptional sound quality from a £300 MP3 player, and in this respect the iPod disappoints.

Simon Handby

✓ Gorgeous design; huge capacity; long battery life

✗ Distortion in many EQ presets; no AC adaptor; restrictive video support

SPECIFICATIONS Hard disk MP3 player, 60GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed, AAC, MPV, MP4, MOV interface. **Part code** MA147FB/A

HOTLIST 2.1 SPEAKERS

TRUST 2.1 Speaker Set SP-3600A

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £32 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.microdirect.co.uk

DETAILS www.trust.com

These classy speakers have a remote that includes a volume control, line input and headphone socket. Sound quality was extremely good in our tests, with solid bass and detailed mid and high frequencies. The speakers aren't massively loud, and the satellite cables are only 1.5 metres long, but they're great value.



SPECIFICATIONS 2.1 speakers, line and aux inputs, 28W RMS power. **Part code** 14235

HOTLIST SOUND CARD

CREATIVE Sound Blaster X-Fi XtremeMusic

RATING ★★★★★

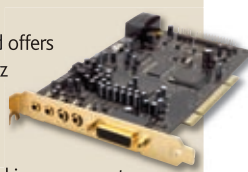
PRICE £84 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.dabs.com

DETAILS <http://uk.europe.creative.com>

Creative's new sound card offers high-quality 24-bit, 96KHz sound recording and playback, although you'll need a good set of speakers to hear the sound improvement. The X-Fi is good for recording music, and also has EAX Advanced HD 5.0 sound processing, which makes games that support it more atmospheric.

If you want the best sound on your PC, the X-Fi is better than any onboard sound chip.



SPECIFICATIONS Line, mic and optical S/PDIF inputs, four line (7.1) outputs, midi port, PCI interface. **Part code** 70SB046002010

HOTLIST SURROUND SPEAKER SET

LOGITECH Z-5500

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £198 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.dabs.com

DETAILS www.logitech.co.uk

Logitech's 5.1 Z-5500 speakers have what it takes to satisfy most people's surround-sound needs. They're powerful enough to shake the house with 505W RMS, and they deliver rich bass thanks to the large subwoofer.

The speakers are THX-certified and come with a DTS and Dolby Digital decoder, so you can plug in a DVD player as well as a PC.



SPECIFICATIONS 5.1 surround sound, 505W RMS, optical and coaxial digital inputs, three stereo inputs, Dolby Digital and DTS decoder. **Part code** 970115-0120



REVIEW NOISE-ISOLATING EARPHONES

SHURE
E4c

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £146 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.dolphinmusic.co.ukDETAILS www.shure.com

While reducing external noise, they also make yawns and swallows more noticeable. Still, the sound quality is the best we've heard from this type of earphone, with respectable bass response and detailed sound at higher frequencies.

The E4cs sound better than Etymotic Research's ER-6i isolators, reviewed in *What's New, Shopper* June 2005. However, Sennheiser's PXC 250 headphones, (*What's New*, December 2005), are better still and remain our favourites.

Simon Handby

✓ High sound quality; well made; wealth of supplied fittings and adaptors

✗ Expensive; uncomfortable for some

SPECIFICATIONS Stereo earphones, impedance 29ohms, sensitivity 109dB

Outside noise can leak through and spoil the pleasure of your MP3 player. You can drown it out by turning up the volume, but this annoys those around you and could damage your hearing.

These lightweight earphones are one way to tackle the problem. Their closed drivers help block environmental noise, but to work at their best they must be inserted firmly into the ear canal. This can feel unpleasantly invasive, but Shure supplies lots of sleeves to help you find a comfortable fit.

REVIEW MP3 PLAYER

SONY
NW-A1000 6GB

RATING ★★

PRICE £145 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.dabs.comDETAILS www.sony.co.uk

The NW-A1000 doesn't use

Sony's annoying SonicStage software, but the Connect package isn't much of an improvement. It partners Sony's online store in a similar way to iTunes, but is clunky to use. This player doesn't support WMA files, and those protected by Microsoft Digital Rights Management (DRM)

cannot be converted. If you buy music online, this limits you to SonyConnect, which came last in our Online Music Stores feature, *Shopper* January 2006.

Sony's supplied earphones sound OK. The NW-A1000 sounded better through the high-quality alternatives we tried, but even with the volume limiter switched off it was rather quiet.

It's hard to recommend the NW-A1000 over its competition. For just another £10 you could buy iRiver's H10 6GB, which has a colour screen and FM radio and plays DRM-protected WMA files.

Simon Handby

✓ Decent sound and battery life

✗ Ugly; no WMA support; too quiet; annoying software

SPECIFICATIONS Hard disk MP3 player, 6GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed, MP3, ATRAC3, ATRAC Plus interface. Part code NWA1000V

HOTLIST MP3 PLAYER

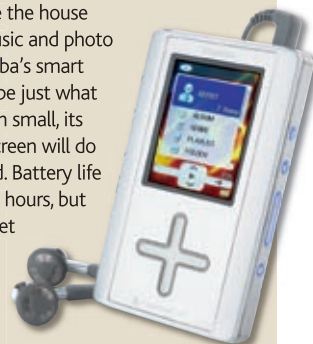
TOSHIBA
Gigabeat F20

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £185 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.dabs.comDETAILS www.gigabeat.toshiba.co.uk

If you can't leave the house without your music and photo collections, Toshiba's smart Gigabeat might be just what you need. Though small, its 320x240 pixel screen will do your snaps proud. Battery life is an excellent 15 hours, but you should budget for a headphone upgrade if you want the best sound quality.



SPECIFICATIONS 20GB capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface, MP3, WMA and WAV playback, JPEG display. Part code MEG-F20

HOTLIST MP3 PLAYER

SONY
NW-HD5 20GB

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £190 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.savastore.comDETAILS www.sony.co.uk

The NW-HD5 looks and sounds superb, and is more compact than most MP3 players with a 1.8" disk. It doesn't play WMA files, though, so it can't be used with stores such as Napster. The player's removable battery lasted 30 hours in our test. It's great value if you don't buy music online.



SPECIFICATIONS 20GB hard disk capacity, USB Hi-Speed interface, MP3, ATRAC3, ATRAC3plus. Part code NWH5R

CHOOSING AN...

MP3
PLAYER

Pick up the beat with our guide to buying an MP3 player

1 Below is a typical specification for an MP3 player costing £40. Using flash memory means it can be very small and light, but its 128MB capacity will provide room for just a couple of albums of MP3s encoded at 128Kbit/s. It's worth buying a player with 256MB or more to provide greater listening choice while on the move. Cheap players often cut corners when it comes to sound quality, so approach these with caution.



2 If you don't mind something bulkier, consider devices that use alternative storage technology. CD-based MP3 players read MP3s burned on a CD-R, but are no longer worth the money. Hard disk-based players have up to 60GB capacity, so they can hold hundreds of albums; prices start at £160. Players based on tiny 1" hard disks of between 1.5GB and 6GB capacity cost from £109, and give an excellent balance of portability and capacity.

3 With the exception of CD-based players, which read pre-recorded discs, most players need a PC interface to upload MP3 files. USB is the most common, but USB Hi-Speed or FireWire give speedier transfers.

4 Battery life varies between two and 50 hours. Hard disk players are the most power-hungry and benefit from a lithium-ion battery, which is light and easy to recharge.

5 Many players play WMA files, Microsoft's rival format to MP3. Hard disk players may also play WAV files for full CD-quality audio.

FILL IN YOUR SPECS HERE
(Recommended minimum in grey)

CAPACITY: 128MB
TECHNOLOGY: Flash memory
INTERFACE: USB
BATTERY: Disposable
SUPPORTED FORMATS: MP3, WMA
EXTRA FEATURES: